

How Long to Pickle a Radish?

Mark 2:23 - 3:6 June 3, 2018

Almost every state has a few surprising laws on their books.

For example, in Iowa a man with a moustache is forbidden from kissing a woman in public.

Indiana law prohibits citizens from attending a movie within four hours after eating garlic.

That actually may be a good law.

In Florida, it is against the law for a woman to fall asleep while under a hairdryer.

I figure that every law has some context – some reason why they felt they needed that law.

I'm imagining that one time a woman had a cocktail at lunch, went to her beauty salon, fell asleep under the hair dryer and then sued the salon owner for a burnt scalp.

So – and I'm just hypothesizing here – to protect against such troubles in the future, the legislature took this action.

Makes sense, but while they were at it, Florida also formally outlawed having sex with a porcupine.

I don't even want to know the history behind that one.

Some people defend their beliefs with the tactic of “scripture pin pong”.

That's where one person quotes a passage that sounds like God's black-and-white rule.

Then someone on the other side chooses a contradictory verse and back and forth they go.

Is anyone ever convinced by such arguments?

I doubt it.

And of course, even the most ardent literalist picks and chooses what laws to get in a huff about.

A few years back we read a book by A J Jacobs (*My Year of Living Biblically – One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible As Literally As Possible*).

If you’d like, you can find his TED Talk on-line.

Try as he might, he found it was impossible, and his repeated attempts to meet all the clearly stated regulations became comical.

I hear people get outraged about homosexuality, but I seldom hear anger expressed by tattoos or wearing fabric blend clothes, both of which are clearly prohibited by scripture.

I occasionally hear a man claim biblical authority for being the head of the household so he can behave like a mini-dictator over his wife, but I don’t recall any of them advocating for the biblical mandate to welcome and care for immigrants.

In today’s passage in Mark 2, a group of religious teachers tries to pull Jesus into that kind of debate.

A little context:

In the opening words of Mark, Jesus confronted Satan, healed many including Simon’s mother-in-law and a man with leprosy – all evidence of the inbreaking of God’s Kingdom.

Good news, right?

But then he offended the religious establishment by sitting down for dinner with sinners and tax collectors.

So only 79 verses into this gospel and Jesus is already the center of attack by both the Pharisees and the Herodians.

These guys were normally on opposite sides, with Pharisees demanding strict adherence to the Law of Moses, and the Herodians promoting the Hellenization of their culture.

Now they're playing the "gotcha games" with Jesus.

Then Jesus tramples through a grain field, picking food on Sabbath ... which they interpret as a violation of sacred rules of traveling and gleaning on the Sabbath.

The word "Sabbath" comes from *sabbaton*, which literally means, "to desist from exertion."

The double beta, or double "b" communicates an intensive form of the word – like writing it with a bold font.

God set up a rhythm of work and rest; of labor and then leisure.

Exodus 20:9-10 Six days you shall labor and do all your work...But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...

Then in the restatement of the Ten Commandments, God emphasizes the Sabbath as a commemoration of the freedom He granted.

Deuteronomy 5:27 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

To be clear, they didn't accuse Jesus of stealing grain.

It was accepted that if someone were hungry, it was okay for them to pluck the ripe grain, rub it in their hands to break open the husks, and then eat the kernels as they walked through the field.

They couldn't put a sickle to harvest the grain, but taking an individual portion by hand was part of the social welfare system of the time.

The problem was that the Pharisees saw picking grain on the Sabbath as an affront to keeping the Sabbath work-free.

Rolling the grain to remove the husks was considered sifting.

Rubbing the kernel was threshing.

The Jewish Talmud, which is like a commentary on the intricacies of acceptable behavior, itemizes 1500 rules in 24 chapters as Sabbath regulations.

The most conservative rabbis concluded that it is unlawful to kill a flea that lands on your arm because that would make you guilty of hunting on the Sabbath.

It was OK to spit on a rock on the Sabbath, but you couldn't spit on the ground, because that made mud, and mud was mortar, therefore that was work.

You could dip your radish in salt but if you left it there too long you were pickling it, and thus working.

Yes, rabbis actually had lengthy discussions about how long it took to pickle a radish.

We don't want to have one dimensional caricature of first century Judaism.

Like today, there was a range of interpretation of the Law, and intelligent, thoughtful dialogue and debate.

For example, one rabbinic writing at the time said, "Profane one Sabbath for a person's sake, so that he may keep many Sabbaths."

Literalism to judge and reject people was the issue.

Whether Jew, Christian, Muslim or whatever, once you go down the rabbit hole of literalism you quickly get lost in the darkness.

With literalism, we begin to worship what was originally intended to point us to God and so we start living in its shadow rather than gazing toward where it points us.

The minutia of how to live the Sabbath, can enslave us on the very day originally given to former slaves to reflect on God's gift of freedom.

Jesus did not reject their scripture.

Remember, elsewhere he said (Matthew 5:17) *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*

Jesus reminded them of a story from 1 Samuel 21.

Mark 2:25-26, *"Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the*

house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”

At that time in 1 Samuel, the jealous king Saul was pursuing young David, who had become a national hero, and whom God had anointed to replace Saul.

Saul felt threatened and was determined to kill David, who was forced to hide in the hills.

David and his small army were exhausted and hungry, so he asks a priest for some help but is told that the only bread on hand was the so-called the Showbread.

The Showbread was twelve loaves of bread representing the twelve tribes of Israel, that were baked specifically for the Sabbath Day.

The loaves were displayed in a holy place in the Tabernacle to remind Israel of the Lord's presence and their dependence on Him for their daily bread.

Leviticus 24:9 specifies that only priests were allowed to eat this bread, but the priest gave the loaves to the hungry men to eat.

In David's case, it was not the mere question of picking some grain like Jesus' disciples, but the more serious charge of eating the sacred Showbread – for which God did not rebuke David.

Jesus' conclusion is that if we step back from a myopic reading of the Law, we find times when scripture itself teaches that human needs trumps legalistic obedience.

Mark 2:27 *Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”*

I know a man who is a devout Orthodox Jew whose congregation wrestled with whether physicians in their community could answer emergency calls on the Sabbath.

They concluded that doctors should make every attempt to not work on the Sabbath because it is important to refresh their own spirits, to live in the rhythms life, and to honor God.

Their Sabbath preparation should include arranging for alternative doctors to be on-call ... but if summoned to save a life or to significantly help a patient that they should go.

As a matter of fact, that is the controversy Jesus faces in the very next passage, Mark 3:1-6.

There he challenges them with whether it is right on the Sabbath to heal a man with a withered hand.

Mark 3:4-6 *Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent.*

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Understand that more was at stake than the man's hand.

Jesus' healing restored his dignity, his ability to earn a living, and to be accepted in his community that often viewed disabilities as unclean and punishments from God.

Jesus was healing community and restoring life.

Hold on to that thought: Jesus restores life and reconnects communities.

One of the issues with legalism is that we think others are legalistic, but we're not.

We tend to judge others by our own standards of what is acceptable and what isn't.

And Christian progressives are also guilty.

Progressives love to quote Isaiah's call to care for the poor, but tend to be weak on scripture's call to tithe, and to run from Jesus' strong mandate to take the Good News to the world.

Majoring in guilt, legalism urges its followers to evaluate everyone's acceptance by God on the basis of selective standards and scores.

God's grace and the larger arc of the scriptural narrative are lost.

Legalism can turn a vibrant, life-giving faith into dull self-righteousness.

Many believe that a primary reason for the decline in church attendance across nearly all denominations is that the church has become its own worst enemy.

Mass media and social media have hyped the voices of the most narrow and judgmental Christians.

So, while the desire for spiritual growth among our nation has remained unchanged, for many, the church is the last place they would think of turning to.

So, legalism turns Jesus into a drill sergeant instead of a prophet and Savior.

There's something else at the heart of this controversy – a controversy that continues to unfold throughout the gospel and ultimately leads to Jesus' death.

There are lots of examples, stories and rabbinic writings Jesus could have used to defend picking the grain on the Sabbath.

But what he chose seemed to equate his calling with King David's calling – and just to drive the point home, he declared himself the “Lord of the Sabbath”.

And then with that self-designation he immediately confronts the Pharisees about healing the man's withered hand.

Jesus seems to be saying that he has the authority to redefine the objectives of the law, from preserving holiness to saving and preserving life.

It's like he's saying, “What better day than the Sabbath – a day of celebrating liberation from slavery – to heal and restore a broken life?”

We live in emotionally polarized times, and much of our division is fueled by literalism.

Back in 1963 I sat in a meeting in Atlanta, Georgia where four young men sought to defend their tradition of racial segregation.

These were not men who put on sheets and burned crosses.

No, they were sincere men willing to discuss and listen.

And I remember how they kept quoting scripture to defend their position.

They recited several passages from the bible, but where was the “What Would Jesus Do” in that kind of reading of scripture?

That’s what literalism does.

If we are going to follow Jesus, then we do as Jesus did.

And what did Jesus do?

He confronted the social boundaries that separate people from each other and from God.

While the controversy in his time may have been healing on the Sabbath, many controversies later it was confronting slavery, then segregation and then women’s rights - and today it is gay marriage.

Marriage is a religious ceremony instituted to celebrate God’s love for His people and their commitment to honor God by a life of faithfulness to each other through good times and bad.

Imagine such a joyful celebration of love and faithfulness being an object of anger and hate by the very institutions of the Christ’s love.

Yep ... some people can point to passages to justify themselves, just as the Pharisees did with Jesus.

But ultimately, just like with the Pharisees, they miss the point entirely.

If we are to truly follow Jesus, then we do what he did – even though it led to his rejection and death at the hands of those invested in their power and self-righteousness.